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# THE LATEST MENACE OF THE MOVIES

BY WALTER PRICHARD EATON

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A PERSON of taste and intelligence, who frequents the theatre in New York with discrimination, finds much to interest and stimulate him, and would be hard put, perhaps, to realize how utterly barren of solid dramatic fare the smaller cities of the country are. To these smaller cities a generation ago came most of the well-known "stars" and most of the successful plays, stopping for a night and passing on. Sometimes there would be one visitor a week, sometimes two, three, or even more if the city was large enough to support so many. Since the development of the motion pictures, however, there has been an astonishing change. Shown at first in small, cheap houses down a side street, the movies progressed rapidly into the main thoroughfares, and then took possession of the playhouses themselves. The managers for a while looked upon them as a gap-filler, something to keep the doors open and the pennies coming in, after Sothern and Marlowe left on Tuesday, until John Drew came on Friday. But it was not long before the managers discovered that the profits from the films were more than the profits from the plays; a film is rented for a comparatively small fee, and no part of the receipts has to be shared, nor paid out to stage hands. Besides, it was not long before the small city public, by and large, developed a preference for the "silent drama," in part because it was cheaper, in part because it was less of a tax on the attention. Pittsfield, Massachusetts, a city of over 40,000 people (I cite it because it is near my home), had one theatre devoted to legitimate drama. Even within a decade, this theatre has housed for two seasons an excellent stock company, and on its stage have appeared players like Mrs.

Fiske, Ethel Barrymore, and John Drew. During the past winter, barring a musical comedy or two advertised on its salacious appeal, there have been, as I recall, a scant half dozen dramas of the so-called first class presented in the city, and one of them was a new play being tuned up for an opening in New York. The theatre is now, in reality, only a movie house. There are not less than four other movie theatres in the city—and one small book store! So far as Pittsfield is concerned, the spoken drama might not exist, even on the printed page. Does any critic complain that our dramatists write only for Broadway? Good gracious, it is that, or nothing!

But now the movies are invading Broadway itself, in a new and startling form. Backed by enormous capital, real or potential—the product of their prosperity, and the goodwill of Wall Street looking for fresh investment fields—certain movie companies, notably one called “The Famous Players-Lasky Corporation,” are actually controlling the production of spoken dramas. Why should they trouble to do this? Because they are desperate for material, and they have discovered that a popular play, especially if it is acted by a popular player, starts its subsequent career as a movie with the great advantage of prestige and aroused expectancy. “Broadway” is still a magic word beyond the Mississippi—even just beyond the Hudson; and, oddly enough, men and women who will not cross the street to see a spoken drama in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, think more highly of a movie if it is acted by a Barrymore, and based on some drama they have read about. I do not know—probably nobody knows—how many thousands of movie theatres there are in America today. There are so many, at any rate, that the demand for new picture stories to supply their screens each week is ludicrously in excess of any humanly possible ability to produce worthy material. Nine-tenths of all movies are bound automatically to be trash. Moreover, one follows so fast on the flicker of another, as they impinge on the jaded eyes and shallow brain of the typical spectator, that something violent is needed or something unusual to awaken his enthusiasm and renew his interest. The successful stage play supplies the movie producer with material that has been worked out already into an art form supposedly rather nearly allied with his own; and it supplies an element of the unusual to awaken his patrons. That is

the reason why the movie producers are invading Broadway.

For example, the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation has purchased the theatrical business of the late Charles Frohman, which includes control of the famous Empire Theatre, a playhouse with perhaps the highest and most exacting standard of any in the country. Frohman always reserved its stage for his best plays, his most accomplished actors—Drew, Gillette, Miss Barrymore, Miss Maude Adams. On that stage all this past winter Miss Barrymore has been acting *Déclassée*, an extraordinarily successful though mediocre drama. It now seems certain that this play will be made into a movie, and Miss Barrymore will again act it before the screen. Probably, to be sure, exactly the same thing would have happened if her managers had not been a motion picture company; what troubles us is rather the wonder what the next play will be which this company mounts on the aristocratic Empire stage. What will become of those high dramatic standards when the new standard of ultimate fitness for movie production begins to operate at its full?—for, of course, as soon as a movie producer begins to select plays for the spoken stage, he will choose, as between two claimants, the one which seems to him the better adapted for subsequent use on the screen. He could not humanly do otherwise.

It has further transpired that it was a movie company which financed the production of Eugene O'Neill's grim naturalistic tragedy, *Beyond the Horizon* (which might seem, at first glance, to give the lie to the conclusion of the last paragraph), and the production of Arnold Bennett's *Sacred and Profane Love*, with Elsie Ferguson as the star. Furthermore, a movie company has publicly announced that it will back any producer who wishes to put on a play, provided it seems to them a play ultimately adaptable to the screen. Much would seem to depend upon what they consider adaptable to the screen. If they consider *Beyond the Horizon* adaptable, and if they consider the plays of G. B. Shaw adaptable (it is reported that \$1,000,000 was offered to Shaw for the film rights to all his plays), then it might be said that it is a little hard to see just how the entrance of the movie companies into the "legitimate" field is going to do quite all the terrible things some of the managers say it is.

But do the movie magnates really consider these things

adaptable? Would *Beyond the Horizon*, for example, even granting that it could be reproduced as a movie, have any elements of popularity with the average screen audiences? On the other hand, will the splendid critical praise it has won, and the admiration it has excited among the few who care for serious and searching art, be far-reaching enough to have any advertising value in Pittsfield, Massachusetts? It was warmly commended in our intellectual weeklies, but you cannot purchase even the mildest of our intellectual weeklies in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Surely the movie companies are not interested in naturalistic tragedy for its own sake. If it shows no profits on the screen, exit naturalistic tragedy. Shaw's name, of course, is one to juggle with. Nearly everybody has heard of Shaw. But they had not when Arnold Daly took him up. Would a movie company have discovered *Candida* and *You Never Can Tell*? Would these plays have looked like promising movies? Try to imagine a movie of *The Importance of Being Earnest*, for that matter, or of *The Mollusk*. It seems a pretty safe assumption that only so long as the movie companies are content with a passive financing of dramatic production, leaving the managers and, far more, the actors, free as of old to pick what interests them for production, will the stage remain, even in New York, at its present level of intelligence.

One of the New York newspapers, interviewing various managers on the subject, drew from A. H. Woods, purveyor-in-chief of bedroom farces, the frank admission that he knew of two dramatic producers only who were primarily interested in the art of the theatre—Winthrop Ames and Arthur Hopkins. All the rest put on plays to get the most money out of them, and if more money was to be got by putting on such plays as best pleased the movie people, instead of such plays as best pleased the relatively small critical public in New York, why then their theatres would be more or less at the disposal of the movie crowd. This is certainly meeting the motion picture producers quite halfway. It appears to mean the imposition on much of the spoken drama of the standards of the screen.

Probably no digression is needed in this place to show what those standards are. Any thoughtful person who has attended a half-dozen ordinary motion picture programmes knows the fatal restrictions of the medium, knows the com-

plete absence from the average screen drama of intellectual body and balance, the complete absence, in fact, of everything which makes the spoken drama, at its best, so noble a thing, except the quick emotional appeal which can be roused by physical action, by pantomime and the expression of the human face—in short, by those elements of drama which can be photographed. Since a profound weakness of our native drama has always been its dependence on physical action, and it has only in comparatively recent years been painfully winning its way to higher things, the imposition upon it of motion-picture standards is most decidedly a step backward, even if all screen dramas strove for the utmost advance in artistic suggestion of which they are capable. Alas, however, very few of them do this. The vast majority are content with the trite, the obvious, the trashy and lurid, with slapstick farce and ridiculous melodrama; they are false to life, turgid, sentimental, the twentieth century substitute for dime novels and nickel shockers. When once our theaters begin to produce dramas not with an eye single to dramatic effectiveness, but rather to subsequent screen popularity, the serious dramatist, the ambitious actor, the artist in stagecraft, will be out of a job.

Temporarily, that is. I am by no means sure but that, in the long run, the result of this latest invasion by the Philistines will be beneficial. Arthur Hopkins, for example, is, as Mr. Woods says, one at least among the theatrical managers who is interested in the theatre as an art. He controls a playhouse of his own, wherein he has shown us plays like *The Jest*, Gorki's *The Lower Depths*, Tolstoi's *Redemption*, and *Richard III*. He has made a serious actor out of John Barrymore, and he has, above all others, given Robert E. Jones the opportunity to develop into a scenic artist of rare insight and power, ranking with the great Europeans. Since Mr. Hopkins has found an appreciative public for his theatre, and, apparently, has made a comfortable living, what is to prevent him from retaining all those artists whose devotion to the spoken drama and its allied arts is greater than their love of movie gold—and there are many such!—and establishing a repertory theatre? Again, the Theatre Guild, in its two years of existence, has given New York *John Ferguson* and *Jane Clegg*, as well as other fine productions. It has developed scenic artists and actors. The spirit behind it is one of devotion to the

arts of the theatre, not to Mammon, the God of the movies. What is to prevent its becoming another nucleus for a permanent theatre?

For a long time now we have proceeded in this country on the assumption that the only workable theatrical system is the ridiculously wasteful one of organizing a fresh company for every new play, and keeping that one company at that one play till every city in the country had seen it which wanted to. How far this system was a natural evolution, and how far it was artificially fostered by monopolistic control of the country's playhouses, is a question I cannot argue here. At any rate, anything which tends to smash this system is certainly not wholly a curse. Under any ideal system, a new play of importance would be presented simultaneously in a hundred theatres through the land, in each case by a fixed, resident company. Only thus can we ever develop anything approaching a national art consciousness, for only thus can all the country be considering the same things at the same time. And only through the existence of repertory companies can a place be made on our stage for the scores upon scores of fine plays which cannot reasonably be expected to run a hundred nights on Broadway, or anywhere else, and which hence are not now produced at all, because it would not pay to organize a special company for their presentation. The reason Europe has so many of these plays, and we so few, is because of the European system of production far more than because of any inherent superiority of talent among European playwrights.

Still further, under our present system Broadway is a chaos. The Empire Theatre has a standard, Mr. Hopkins' theatre has a standard, the Belasco Theatre has a standard—of a sort; but what others? Who, even the wisest, can predict from the name of a theatre the character of performance he will find therein? The managers say that play-production is a gamble. The public knows that play-attendance is! Amid such chaos, a repertory theatre, once established and known, would be a Gibraltar of stability, the shadow of a great rock in a weary land.

Well, suppose the Famous Players-Lasky company (the company, by the way, which made a movie of Barrie's *Admirable Crichton* and changed the name to *Male and Female* because they feared—perhaps with reason—that the public would think it was "something about the navy"!)

do get control of half the theatres and three-fourths of the managers in New York and cause to be produced on their stages only such spoken dramas as will please the kind of people who, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, go to the movies three times a week, and such as will translate successfully into the silly trash and trumpery of screen dramas;—what of it? If half a dozen managers and fine actors and brilliant scenic designers, who are in the theatre because they love it, because they are artists, stand true to the faith, there will inevitably be created half a dozen theatres with more or less permanent companies, where those remnants of the American people who still believe man has in his head and in his heart more things than can be conveyed by pantomime, lifted eyebrows and a well-aimed custard pie, may repair to hear the music of Shakespeare's verse, to sit under the spell of Robert Jones' suggestive scenery—so far removed from the stark and ugly reality of the camera—to follow the crackle of Shaw's wit, to listen to the whimsies of J. M. Barrie, to rouse to the challenges of Galsworthy's social passion; in short, to enjoy the noble art of the drama. Some order will emerge at last from what has long been chaos; the sheep and the goats will be sharply divided. There will be theatres; and places of amusement. The dramatists who write not for the stage, but for the profits, will write for the places of amusement, merely filling in movie scenarios with dialogue, just as a host of our popular novelists are doing today. But the Rex Beaches and the Louis Joseph Vances and the Rupert Hughes have not caused Mr. Wells nor Mr. Walpole to give up in despair, nor our own Joseph Hergesheimer. There is still a place for literature in spite of the movies. There will still be a place for the drama, in spite of the movies. The invasion in the one field does not promise, in reality, to be any more serious than in the other, except that it demands a larger physical readjustment, since a play has to be viewed by a thousand people at once, in a theatre.

The future, of course, belongs to the theatrical artists of vision, ideals, impelling conscience. There are many of them. There have always been many of them. No other art has ever commanded a more undivided love, a more concentrated devotion, than the art of the spoken drama. Nor was this art ever more widely appreciated and studied by more thoughtful people than today, at the very time when



it seems to be in such danger. Its professional followers, its host of amateur lovers, scattered hitherto, dividing their efforts, often wasting them, will, it is quite possible, be driven to find one another in union. The beginnings of true repertory theatres will first be made in New York, of course. But they will not stop there. If the movie companies and their allied theatrical managers control the theatres in other cities, booking for tour only their own attractions, then repertory theatres will arise in Chicago, Indianapolis, San Francisco, and many other cities, even, perhaps, in the course of time in Boston, so that the minority who are not now and never can be satisfied with the trash of the movies may hear and enjoy the finer art of the drama. The prospect, after all, is depressing only as it shows the enormous hold the movies have on the mass of the American people. Any people who can be content with the false and sentimental twaddle of the average movie drama, even if it is low-priced, who can find relaxation in an art so childish and crude and utterly devoid of mental stimulation, utterly lacking, as a rule, in any call to the powers of concentration or reflection, utterly without beauty or glamor, is a people deficient, certainly, in mentality and esthetic sensitiveness. The true theatre could never have been for them, and the sooner the line is drawn sharply, the better for the theatre—if the worse for them.

And yet—and yet—there is another possibility. There is a possibility that the movie magnates may discover, to their discomfiture, that the hundreds of thousands of Americans who still go to the theatre are not, after all, entirely devoid of civilized instincts. They may discover that Shakespeare and G. B. Shaw, Henry Miller and Mrs. Fiske, Galsworthy and John Barrymore, are admired because they possess just those qualities of beauty, glamor, intellectual body, finesse, which the movies lack, and that to produce plays which are mere scenarios with dialogue is not to court success but failure. The movie magnates may be driven either to let the players still have their own way, or retire from the field altogether. The Famous Players-Lasky company and the rest may be just a trifle like the famous frog in the fable. However, time will tell, and perhaps it is wisest to wait for the verdict of that unimpeachable authority.

WALTER PRICHARD EATON.